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# Breathing to Restore Primal Health

## Methods



**D**oes freediving alter your state of consciousness? That's what I found the first time I tried the sport. I was eager to make something spiritual out of diving deep underwater with nothing but a mask, snorkel, fins, and one breath of air. Ever since that fateful day, I have practiced spiritual breathing exercises more seriously, and I've concluded that breath work should always be included as one of the cornerstones of a well-rounded mystical discipline.

My breath-hold adventures began when my veteran freediving friend, Carlos, brought me out to a man-made reef just off the shore of our local South Florida beach. The luminous, turquoise-colored water out there isn't very deep over the submerged rocks. Sixteen feet. Perfect for a beginner.

The abundance of life on the reef astonished me. So many shimmering creatures and colors in one place! Parrot fish, angel fish, sergeant majors, nurse sharks, moray eels, lobsters, and more. When we got back to shore, I shared my excitement with Carlos. But I also lamented that I didn't notice anything "spiritual" about the dive experience. There was no Zen-like oneness with the ocean. "I guess I've yet to experience the dive reflex," I chuckled.

The mammalian dive reflex is a fabled biological phenomenon that happens — as its namesake indicates — in all mammals. Humans included. A physiologist back in the 60s, by the name of Per Scholander, called it "the master switch of life." The dive reflex is essentially a physiological adaptation to water that shifts your perception of reality.

As I'm sure you know, the water pressure in your ears increases, the deeper you dive. Your lungs also experience this pressure, and that pressure, combined with the buildup of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) in your cells, triggers a slowdown in your heart rate. The effect essentially amounts to a slowdown of your metabolism which, in turn, produces effects similar to meditation. It opens up higher brain function, giving you, quite possibly, a rapturous glimpse into the primal mind. If you're lucky, holding your breath in deep water just might "open wide the doors of perception," as devotees of psychedelia would say.

Carlos tried to reassure me that the mammalian dive reflex is quite real but that "weird spiritual stuff" happens mainly during deeper dives with longer breath-holds. "Maybe when you get better at it and go deeper, it will happen," he seemed to promise.

But it *had* happened. I just hadn't noticed...yet.

On our way back to the boardwalk, we had to step around the various beach-goers lying about on the sand, and suddenly I felt like an intruder, like Carlos and I were strangers among these nervous, fidgeting humans. Something was different. It seemed I was witnessing two different realities overlapping.

Was it that *they* were lost in some other dimension? Or was it that *we* were the odd ones, so quiet and calm, like two serene aliens just emerged from the depths of a blue universe? Nearby, a mother was frantically barking at her two children, commanding them, essentially, to stop behaving so much like children. They were being “too loud” or “That’s dangerous! Put it down!” The children were apparently agitated too, fighting over who gets to hold a neon-pink shovel. Two old men, close by, argued rather absentmindedly with each other about the size of the latest Florida Lottery jackpot. As we neared the wooden steps, a young woman complained into her smartphone, apparently condemning her new boyfriend to some fiery circle of hell. Her eyes didn’t seem to focus on anything physical in her immediate vicinity. Where was she?

These people might as well have been trying to enjoy their day at the beach through four inches of plexiglass, so cut off were they from the natural world that danced, shimmered, and swirled over their mentally distracted bodies. They had physical bodies, yes, but they were largely neglecting them by retreating into their minds. No one seemed attuned to the riot of physical sensations that enveloped all of us. No one was reveling in the intimate, electric grit of the salt and sand, the scintillating laughter of the ocean waves, and the soothing warmth of the wind bustling in our ears — not to mention that heavenly orb of white fire in the sky that was pressing its life force deep into our skin.

Carlos noticed me gaping at the psychotic spectacle of humanity around us. Grinning, he clapped me on the shoulder and congratulated me in his macho Cuban accent: “Ladies and gentleman, the mammalian dive reflex.” He bowed.

### **Between Two Worlds**

What was it that had come over me? I’m no stranger to spiritual disciplines. I had felt this before. It’s a shift that sometimes steals over me during ritual— or in the mornings, just after I wake up and step into the light of sunrise. But it had never come over me quite like this. From what I’ve learned since, it’s the buildup of CO<sub>2</sub> in your cells that produces this kind of effect. But what manner of effect is it?

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*“A fool sees not the same tree as the wise man sees.”*

*— William Blake*

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Well, it's quite simple really. Human beings have two different nervous systems. One of them, the sympathetic nervous system, stresses you out and sabotages your joy. The other one, the parasympathetic nervous system, provides you with all you need to become an enlightened being.

Because of my breath-hold diving, I had activated my parasympathetic nervous system, which opened up my eyes to the world around me. It woke up my higher brain functions and helped me see reality as it truly is. It's an experience that some Buddhists call *Samadhi* — none other than a little glimpse of enlightenment.

You can do this too. But first some introductions are in order:

### **The Sympathetic Nervous System**

The nerves of this system fire to life when we experience *danger* or *need*. If there's a shark swimming toward you (as they sometimes do because they're simply curious), chances are your experiences in movie theaters have conditioned you to freak out. And *voilà!* The sympathetic nervous system springs to life. The stress hormones cortisol and adrenaline course through your veins. Your digestion shuts down, immune function diminishes, and even your higher brain functions switch off. Why does this happen? So that your body can divert its energy toward either one of these two actions: (1) fight off the shark (Good luck with that) or (2) swim for shore as fast as you can. Congratulations. Your sympathetic nervous system has initiated its infamous "fight-or-flight" response.

It takes a lot less than a shark to stimulate fight-or-flight. Another car cutting you off in traffic can easily do it, or even a fellow student finishing an exam before you. The mildest physical discomfort or the slightest sense of need can provoke elevated heart rate and increased breathing, nudging you more and more into fight-or-flight mode. All it takes is the mention of a "terrorist plot" on CNN (danger) or a YouTube ad saying that a new \$6 toothbrush is better than the one you've got (need). A scary movie will do it too. Your nervous system doesn't really care whether danger is real or not. Whether you're being munched on by an actual shark or you're watching the opening scene of *Jaws*, the sympathetic nervous system will flare to life just the same.

The most troublesome thing about this for you and me is that modern humans have a horrendously overactive sympathetic nervous system. Not only is our fight-or-flight

response triggered easily, but its arousal lingers for extensive periods of time. It wreaks havoc with our health and makes us irritable and stupid. There are three main reasons why this has happened to us in our evolution: the agricultural diet, cultural conditioning, and excessive sedentary breathing. In this article, I will only discuss breathing. The other factors, serious as they are, will have to wait for future articles.

But wait. How does fear keep you from experiencing enlightenment? How does it keep you cut off from the truth about who and what you really are? Isn't fear a primal state of awareness? Something that makes you more intimate with the world around you?

Many physiologists claim that the fight-or-flight response does just that. They claim that it forces us to focus on our immediate, material environment so that we can grapple with any threats to our survival. This is true. They also claim that focusing on our immediate material surroundings is the same thing as focusing on "reality."

False!

Yes, your fight-or-flight response compels you to focus on your immediate circumstances. That much is true. For example, it makes an anxious test-taker aware that the door to the classroom is partly open: *An escape route!* Or it makes her suddenly appreciate her pencil as a potential weapon. But that kind of miraculous re-prioritizing of material resources in no way makes a human's fight-or-flight response *realistic*.

Our fight-or-flight mode of existence actually spurs us to action by creating its own kind of fantasy world (for what is the material world but a highly presumptuous explanation of our sensory experience). Fight-or-flight heightens your senses, yes, but it uses a pre-programmed kind of drama to do that. It fictionalizes your experience of the world and paints a rather bleak, over-simplified picture of it, re-defining you as a limited, physical object that is the victim of another supposed physical object. It creates an isolated inner fortress (ego) that imagines itself besieged by a hostile outer reality. This "me"-centered drama is what rises up in your mind to replace your higher brain functions. Quite simply, *the sympathetic nervous system screws with your normal baseline perception of reality*. And if you get duped into the fight-or-flight mode a lot, even when it's the mildest possible state of on-the-job stress, that's enough to make your life look pretty damn bleak to you. Hence humankind's unenlightened state.

I cannot emphasize enough just how incredibly insidious this aspect of our nervous system has become (thanks to poor diet, crappy cultural conditioning, and deranged breathing). The stress response is so subtle in its ability to destroy our natural blissed-out state of mind that it can take a lifetime of mystical training to learn how to notice it in action and subdue it.

### **The Parasympathetic Nervous System**

To the rescue comes the part of your nervous system that calms you down. The parasympathetic nervous system brings you back down to Mother Earth, into a more accurate perception of reality. This part of the nervous system is famous for producing the “rest and digest” mode of being. When you’re awake, this is an alert, resting state of mind, and its an outlook upon the world that allows all your bodily systems to function optimally. Your immune system springs to life, your intestines absorb nutrients, cells repair themselves, and higher brain function lights up. Intelligence, bliss, and clarity ensue. Sometimes this happens to a degree and level of intensity that is utterly astonishing.

**JOE VERSUS THE VOLCANO ~ Constant Total Amazement**



“...constant, total amazement.” (From the movie \*Joe Versus the Volcano\*)

Think of it this way. You enter a beautiful green forest, you sit back on a soft blanket of moss, and you take a deep breath, filling first the belly and then the chest. You hold it

in for four seconds and then let it out slowly, making a “Sssssssss...” sound, like a deflating tire. The sound continues and diminishes for many seconds until your lungs simply hang limp in your chest. Imagine this subsiding hiss as your last breath. Your dying breath. You are allowing yourself to let go. Feel your life force deflating, settling down, spreading back out into the universe. Your soul is free to return to nature, free to fill the glowing green of the leaves around you, the gruffness of the rocks, and azure glory of the sky. That old, entrenched existence of “me against the world” dissolves. All drama melts away.

Or does it? Dare to let yourself relax enough and you will discover that beneath the old theatrical display of “good me/evil world,” *a new drama emerges*. The universe shines anew, this time not as your fight-or-flight response would create it...but as it actually is!

What does the world look like when a constantly freaked-out nervous system isn't painting all of the natural forces within it as potential threats? Find out for yourself. Try some breathing exercises that deliberately stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system.

### Four Breathing Exercises

**The Fourfold Breath:** This is a beginners exercise for yogic breathing. In its beginners' format, the exercise doesn't really help you increase your tolerance to CO<sub>2</sub>, but it does set up the basic framework for more advanced forms of breath-hold training that actually will do that. Since I am an initiate of Golden Dawn mysticism, I'm going to quote the Fourfold Breath exercise right out of a Golden Dawn book from my bookshelf.

1. *Empty the lungs and hold while counting four [seconds].*
2. *Inhale while counting four so that you feel filled with air up to the throat.*
3. *Hold the breath while counting four.*
4. *Exhale counting four until the lungs are empty.*

For an even better effect, make sure each in-breath happens through the nose only, and make sure you breathe with the belly only. And for the out-breath, use the mouth and make the deflating “Ssssss” sound.

If you are new to this kind of yogic breathing, place one hand on your chest and one hand on your belly. Only the belly should move. No chest breathing allowed. Belly breathing stimulates the vagus nerve, part of the parasympathetic nervous system. Chest breathing stimulates fight-or-flight.

The idea is to practice the fourfold breath before ritual or meditation so that you can calm down and settle the mind. When you reach step 4, simply start over with step one. Continue repeating this sequence for five or more minutes.

The advanced form of this exercise is quite simple, and it's one that I teach to students who are ready for hardcore spiritual work. In addition to its calming effect, it induces an ever-so-slight amount of stress to the body. How is it different? For step 3, hold on to the in-breath for some additional counts of four seconds each. That is, instead of counting just to four, count to 8 or 12 or 16 or more. Count that way, holding the breath only until you experience significant air hunger, and then proceed to step 4. You should not hold the breath for so long that you gasp for air or mess up your smooth progression through steps 1 through 4.

The idea of the advanced form of this exercise is to increase the time period in which you can comfortably hold your breath. Done daily, this exercise very gradually increases your body's tolerance to CO<sub>2</sub>, resulting in longer and longer breath-holds. As you may recall, a higher level of CO<sub>2</sub> in your body results in innumerable health benefits, not to mention the fact that CO<sub>2</sub> naturally increases the dominance of your parasympathetic nervous system, potentially bringing about a glimpse of enlightenment.

**The Dead Breath:** This exercise directly stimulates the vagus nerve, activating the parasympathetic nervous system. I use it to slow down my heart rate when I'm relaxing in the ocean, preparing for a breath-hold dive. It is, perhaps, the most practical exercise presented here because it can be done anywhere — even while driving a car.

1. Using the belly only, breathe in through the nose for the count of four seconds.
2. Breathe out through the mouth, making the subsiding "Ssssssss..." sound for 8 seconds or longer. Just allow the lungs to empty. Don't push. Feel yourself relaxing

and ebbing away with that deflating hiss, letting the tense, fictional version of you die.

3. Important: Now let the lungs simply hang empty. Do not hold the breath in the out position. Simply let the lungs “hang there” and be relaxed. When the slightest air hunger begins to set in, only then should you proceed to step 1.

Step three in the above sequence is important because it allows CO<sub>2</sub> to build up in your body, keeping you from hyperventilating. Hyperventilation rouses the fight-or-flight response.



Image from [yogawithcr.com](https://yogawithcr.com)

**Minding the Gate:** This exercise comes from classical *pranayama*, from the practice of “suspending the breath in the nostrils.” For some people, it’s quite challenging because you perform it all day long — which means you must maintain a certain level of awareness over your breathing. The technique involves shallow breathing, and the aim is to retain a reservoir of carbon dioxide in your lungs. In other words, to not let too much CO<sub>2</sub> escape. Remember that CO<sub>2</sub> is a treasure, not just a waste gas. Your body

maintains a concentration of CO<sub>2</sub> over 180 times greater than the amount found in Earth's atmosphere. You can help it hoard CO<sub>2</sub> via relaxed, restrained, shallow breathing.

There are several elements to Minding the Gate, and these must all function together simultaneously.

- Breathe through the nose only. No mouth-breathing permitted.
- Keep your attention focused, more or less, on guarding the nostrils. There should be very little air passing through them, a barely detectable ebb and flow.
- Breathe with the belly only. There should be only the slightest rising and falling sensation in the lower belly.
- An important key to this exercise is to allow for a significant pause between the out-breath and in-breath. No need for the diaphragm to constantly be in motion. Learn to simply rest comfortably with the lungs empty, between breaths.
- Take in no more air than you need.
- If you catch yourself lapsing and you allow yourself to sigh, that's no big deal. Simply restrain the sigh slightly with the outgoing "Sssss..." sound, doing steps 2 and 3 of the Dead Breath. Then resume the practice of Minding the Gate.

If you are doing this exercise properly, you will never feel short of breath, and your hands will always feel warm. If the hands or extremities become cold, that's probably a sign that your breathing has become too intense and your CO<sub>2</sub> has dropped too low, decreasing your body's ability to generate vital energy.

You may want to note from this that you can quickly uncover the secrets of controlling body heat if you continue with practices like the Dead Breath (!). In Tibetan Buddhism, the mystical discipline of generating body heat is called Tummo.

**Hypoxic Training:** This has become somewhat popular in the fitness world today. You may even have seen someone at the gym wearing a "hypoxic training mask."



All the mask does is restrict airflow, making it laborious to breathe while working out. The claim is that this restriction of air simulates high-altitude training, but that is not really what it does. The mask simply keeps you from breathing too much, helping your body build up massive amounts of CO<sub>2</sub> while you exercise. It is not so much a hypoxic (low-oxygen) training mask as it is a hypercapnic (high-CO<sub>2</sub>) training mask.

Using this mask while exerting yourself, forces your brain stem to grow accustomed to higher levels of CO<sub>2</sub> in the blood. Using it while doing cardio can, over time, undo years of damage done by a sedentary lifestyle — in which we sit still and get overstimulated by video screens, breathing too much, increasing our bodies' sensitivity to CO<sub>2</sub> and wrecking our health.

The hypoxic training mask is not exactly a fashion statement, but don't worry! It is completely unnecessary. No need to go out and get one because you can easily train without it. You can practice hypoxic training simply by running on a treadmill and synchronizing some breath-holds with your running steps. Very simple.

Begin by walking at a brisk pace on the treadmill. After 4 minutes, start jogging at a slow, comfortable pace. I normally proceed at only 6.6 miles per hour. When the five-minute mark comes, begin your five minutes of the hypoxic breathing pattern while continuing your pace:

1. Breathe in for three steps.
2. Hold the breath for three steps.
3. Exhale for three steps. Repeat.

Note that the time spent in part 2 can vary, and the goal is to gradually increase the number of steps during your breath-hold up to 6, 7, 8, or even more steps. For example, you might do this exercise daily for one month, keeping part 2 at only two steps. The following month, you'll hold the breath for three steps. The next month, you'll hold the breath for four. Then five. And so on. This can be really challenging on some days, but you must learn to persevere. The point is to deliberately stress out the body, so go ahead and push yourself to work up a sweat.

Hypoxic training can generate incredible body heat, and you might find yourself drenched in perspiration, even if you're in an air-conditioned gym.

Note: I won't bore you with the usual health warnings of trying something like this. Simply take complete responsibility for your actions before you engage in any of the breathing exercises in this article.



Not everyone who practices these techniques will notice immediate results. Remember that, on average, modern people breathe way more than is optimal for primal health, and as a result, we are way too sensitive to carbon dioxide. We gasp for breath and expel the CO<sub>2</sub> before it can reach healthy levels. Our overstimulated, sedentary lives have accustomed us to a sub-optimal metabolism that keeps us weak, distracted, irritable, and vulnerable to chronic diseases — to the point that “weak,” “distracted,” and “irritable” are now considered our normal state of being! How do we get back to

the robust health and primal awareness of our pre-civilized ancestors? We spend months doing these kinds of CO2-desensitizing exercises.

Also, it may sound strange, but lusting for results can often interfere with your ability to make a spiritual breakthrough. Remember that I was blissed-out on the beach the first time I tried freediving, and I almost failed to notice anything at all. Discerning the difference between the stress-response mode and the rest-and-digest mode is a skill that Zen masters spend years developing. Enlightenment is an elusive thing. It is hidden all around us in plain sight but not very noticeable to us non-Buddha types. If it really were that easy to achieve, everyone would master the techniques of tuning in by the time they reach adulthood.

I should further remind you that breath is just one of the cornerstones of an effective mystical discipline. Just using breath techniques alone to increase your health and spiritual well-being takes *a lot* of discipline. Remember that there are two other monstrous factors to deal with, other than deranged breathing, and they are also destroying your ability to appreciate the universe just as it is: (1) the agricultural diet and (2) cultural conditioning.

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